

SOUTHEASTEDITORIALS BLOG

Funds won't solve gridlock

Something doesn't add up in our long-range transportation plans.

We're spending billions on bus service, light rail and additional street and freeway lanes, in hopes they'll make commuting easier. Yet for all the money we're spending, our long-range plans still predict increased congestion and miles traveled to our destinations.

So we're not really solving the problem.

Of course not, the Urban Land Institute says. The national land-planning organization, better known around these parts for the blueprint it created for Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, says in a new report that our plans have a fundamental flaw.

We want people to ditch their cars and walk, bike or ride mass transit to work, and rightly so. Fewer cars on the road should ease ozone and particulate pollution, making it easier for all of us to breathe.

It would save us a ton of money in gas and reduce the "time tax" businesses pay when their employees and products are stuck in gridlock, boosting productivity and reducing the bottom line.

Yet we keep building pedestrian-unfriendly suburbs farther and farther into the desert, with inadequate roads, scarce transit options and few nearby jobs or shopping opportunities.

As long as we continue to sprawl, we'll never actually solve the congestion problem. Which is exactly the Urban Land Institute's point.

If our goal is truly to decrease congestion, we have to objectively ask what is needed to do so. And not just limit that conversation to X-many freeway lanes, X-many bus lines or X-many miles of light-rail or commuter-rail track.

Land use is intimately tied to transportation. If we want to free up our freeways, we have to design the spaces where we live, work and shop to encourage that.

Does that mean all of us should sell our cars and abandon the suburbs for high-rise condos? Of course not.

But we do need to think differently about how we build — and retrofit — the Southeast Valley's subdivisions, shopping centers and office complexes. That includes more condos near transit stops and mixed-use developments.

But even if most of us continue living in detached homes with garages and backyards, we still need short, convenient connections between our homes and transit, retail and job centers.

That could mean a new bus or commuter-rail line. Or it could be something as simple as a path from a neighborhood to the corner retail and office complex.

This won't be an overnight job, or one only government can fix. But hey, it's better than spending billions of taxpayer dollars on projects and still choking on our own traffic.

Southeast Valley is a part of a much bigger picture

The Southeast Valley isn't the only area bracing for more gridlock in the next 25 years. The Urban Land Institute says most of the nation's largest cities are in the same boat.

That's a problem. This isn't the same world it was 10 years ago. Climate change, limited gas and water supplies, population growth and a globally connected economy are challenging the status quo.

Developing nations like China and India are making massive infrastructure investments to compete in this new world.

